

Case Study

ASDA Stores

Actively recruiting older workers

In all its stores, Asda works to recruit a colleague base which reflects the local population, and has found that actively recruiting older workers mirrors its customer base more closely, ultimately providing better customer service.

Says Jacki Connor, from Asda colleague relations: "We believe that to make the most effective use of colleagues' skills, employment decisions should be made simply by asking: who is the best person for the job. At Asda we've found that some of our best colleagues also happen to be some of our oldest - with loads of experience to share with the younger colleagues. They make a massive difference to our stores We have over 20,000 colleagues who are over 50, representing 19 per cent of our workforce."

"I quickly got bored of retirement so I applied to ASDA. I feel valued - it's not just the benefits, it's the attitude of the colleagues."

Alan, 78, Wallington store

Asda's spokeswoman, Rachel Fellows, explains why the company has now become one of the biggest employers of people aged over 50.

"A little while back we were opening a store in Broadstairs in Kent, which has a high percentage of older residents. We wanted to reflect the customer base, so we targeted that store to have half of its staff aged 50 or over. At the time there were a few nay-sayers who told us the store's productivity would drop, that we'd have more absences, more staff off sick and less motivation. In fact, the reverse happened."

National recruitment campaign

Asda decided to turn its discovery at Broadstairs into a national campaign to recruit older people. "Initially we were aiming for around 16 per cent of our staff to be made up of over-fifties, but that's now risen to 19 per cent," Rachel says.

In part, Asda has been spurred on by the country's changing demographics. Already, 40 per cent of the population is aged 50 or over and that figure is set to increase.

Asda has gone to great lengths to seek out older employees - even attending tea dances and bingo nights to find potential recruits.

Asda's 'seasonal squad' and other innovations

But the real effort has gone into creating a range of flexible working options that reflect the fact that a large proportion of the company's older employees do not want to be holding down a full-time job.

As well as offering unpaid leave for grandparents and carers, Asda also allows employees to take what has been called 'Benidorm leave', where their job is kept open for them while they take a few months off to head for sunnier climes in the winter. Another innovation is the 'seasonal squad', where people can choose to work for the 10 busiest weeks of the year over Christmas, Easter and the summer holidays without having to leave and rejoin the company.

"After 30 years working on the London Underground, I fancied a change. Other companies said I was 'over qualified', in other words, too old! ASDA jumped at the chance of employing me. Their attitude is first class and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to anyone of my age".

Danny, 53, Wembley store

The company recognises that many of its staff don't want to work full-time all year round, so it has tried to accommodate them by helping them manage their work-life balance.

Concludes Rachel; "It's great for us. We have continuity, a pool of people who know what to do and don't need retraining, plus a whole load of flexibility," she says. "Our labour turnover has dropped and our customer satisfaction survey results and colleague approval ratings have both improved. We are competing and winning in a very competitive business. In no small part, that is because of our older workers."

The business benefits for ASDA of an age diverse workforce:

- Mirrors a business's customer base more closely, providing better customer service
- Professional and life experience to share with other colleagues
- Continuity of staff and experience
- Extra flexibility
- Reduced labour turnover, which reduces new recruit training costs
- Improved customer satisfaction survey results and staff satisfaction.